

Aeschylus' taste for wicked women

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This article explores some ways in which Aeschylus outdoes Homer in his portrayal of Clytemnestra as a wicked woman. It considers some motivations for this exceptionally negative presentation from a tragedian who was famed for his 'moralizing' characters.

Tragedy as teacher: the problem of Clytemnestra

'A playwright should conceal wickedness, not parade it around and teach it' – so claims Aeschylus as a character in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. By the time this comedy was put on stage in 405 B.C., both Aeschylus and Euripides were dead, enabling Aristophanes to present them as stage characters in Hades who compete for recognition as the best playwright. During the debate, Aeschylus criticizes Euripides for putting whores on stage and claims they set a bad example for the audience. Aeschylus insists that the playwright's role is to conceal wickedness, act as teachers to the audience, and speak of morally beneficial things. As soon as we start to look at Aeschylus' plays, however, it becomes clear that he did not live up to the ideals set out by his Aristophanic stage character – far from it.

Aeschylus' Clytemnestra is one of the most shameless female characters in surviving Greek tragedy. This was clearly no accident. Although Aeschylus might contend that he did not make up the story of Clytemnestra's infidelity and Agamemnon's murder, he would still have to explain why his portrayal of Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia* makes no attempt to conceal her wickedness. In fact, it is clear that Aeschylus went to some lengths to play up the shamelessness of this character, even going beyond the already shocking account of her actions in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Elevating evil?

Clytemnestra is referred to a number of times in Homer's epic poem about the return of Odysseus after the Trojan War. Most importantly for our purposes, Agamemnon's ghost tells the story of his return and murder as a warning to Odysseus in book 11. We hear of how he

was invited to a feast by Aegisthus (Clytemnestra's lover) and murdered there. Although it is Aegisthus, rather than Clytemnestra, who butchers him, Agamemnon notes his wife's shamelessness in not even closing the eyes of his corpse and suggests that she had an equal part in planning the murder. He condemns her for this abominable crime in no uncertain terms and claims she has brought disgrace on all women (a condemnation which he repeats in the final book of the poem).

Homer's version of the myth would have been well known to the audience who sat down in Athens in 458 B.C. to watch Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy. The vehemence of Agamemnon's repeated condemnation of Clytemnestra in the *Odyssey* could have prepared them to expect a shameless character, but they surely would not have anticipated that Aeschylus' Clytemnestra would actually outdo the Homeric one in wickedness. This, I suggest, is what Aeschylus does and he signals what he is up to by careful allusion to the *Odyssey* as an intertext (that is, a piece of literature evoked, through a reference or allusion, in order to create a layer of added meaning to a later piece of literature). While Homer uses Clytemnestra in the *Odyssey* as a foil (contrast) to Penelope and uses the comparison of the two to highlight the virtue of Odysseus' wife, Aeschylus uses allusions to Penelope to bring out the wickedness of Clytemnestra.

In *Agamemnon*, the first play of the *Oresteia* trilogy, Clytemnestra styles herself as a Penelope, first in her message for Agamemnon in which she claims that she has remained faithful (604–12) and secondly in her speech directly to him about her experience of waiting for his return (855–94). She, like Penelope, has apparently shed many tears and been misled by false news about her absent husband. These allusions to Penelope

bring the famous representation of her in the *Odyssey* to mind and invite a comparison between Homer's Penelope and Aeschylus' Clytemnestra. The contrast serves to highlight the wickedness of Clytemnestra who pretends to be the perfect wife but is nothing of the sort.

Transforming Homer's model

At the same time, the audience may also reflect on the mentions of Clytemnestra in the *Odyssey* and how far Aeschylus' stage character lives up to her epic predecessor. The means of murder and its aftermath together ensure that Aeschylus' character outdoes the Homeric one in wickedness. In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra takes a far more active role in the murder by offering her husband a bath which turns out to be lethal. Good wives, like Andromache in the *Iliad* (22.437), prepare baths for their husbands, but they do not then wrap them in a cloth and stab them. This is strike one against the Aeschylean Clytemnestra, her perversion of this matrimonial norm and the infliction of such an inglorious death on a veteran of the Trojan War. Later in the *Agamemnon*, the chorus lament the shameful death and the theme recurs again at later stages in the trilogy.

Secondly, she shows no remorse. After the murder, she stands over the body of Agamemnon and boasts about how she enveloped him in a robe and stabbed him. Here again her wickedness is emphasized through the presentation of her action as a perverted ritual and her distasteful allusion to the natural world, as she claims that the blood which spurted on her during the murder was as welcome as rainfall to the earth when flowers grow.

Finally, while, unlike her neglectful Homeric counterpart, she promises to take care of the burial of his corpse, this can in the circumstances only cause disquiet. The chorus are right to be concerned about the burial, as we learn in the second play of the trilogy, *Libation Bearers*, that Clytemnestra has engaged in the ancient rite of *maschalismos* (armpitting). This involved the mutilation of the corpse by cutting off the ears and nose, stringing them together, and placing this string around the neck and under the armpits.

The idea was to try to stop the corpse from being able to incite vengeance. This final action in the aftermath of the murder far outdoes the outrageousness of the Homeric Clytemnestra's failure to close Agamemnon's eyes in death.

Literary criticism: dramatic skill

There is no question that the Clytemnestra we meet in the *Agamemnon* lives up to her Homeric reputation and even goes beyond it. But why did Aeschylus choose to portray her in this way?

Later tradition has him (again as a literary character, as in Aristophanes' *Frogs*) claiming his plays were 'slices from the great banquet of Homer'. But of course they are more than that. Aeschylus, and the other tragedians, put their own spin on the treatment of already familiar myths to create interest for the audience and to make a reputation for themselves. Aeschylus may take his lead from Homer in comparing Penelope and Clytemnestra and in portraying Clytemnestra as a paragon of shamelessness, but, as we have seen, he goes further and the careful development of dramatic effects generated from these Homeric starting points is all his own work. But in addition to displaying his new treatment of a Homeric model, Aeschylus may also have wanted to present Clytemnestra as wicked and shameless in the *Agamemnon* for his own dramatic purposes to highlight the poetic justice of the acquittal of her son Orestes on the charge of her murder in the final play of the trilogy (*Eumenides*). In Aeschylus' hands, the figure of Clytemnestra is elevated in evil and immersed in complexity.

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